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RICHARD DABNEY

To those of us who do not believe with Matthew Arnold that only the great names in literature are worth our while, Richard Dabney is an interesting figure. As a man and as a poet he commands our sympathy and our respect. He is above all an illuminating figure as an exponent of American literary culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Chronologically he is one of the very first American men of letters, and a study of his career throws light upon our literary evolution at that critical period when men like Charles Brockden Brown, Joseph Dennie, and Dabney were causing literature to emerge from a stage where it has been an occasional relaxation or a temporary instrument of castigation to that in which it is beginning to establish itself as a profession.

Richard Dabney was born in Louisa County, Virginia, in 1787. His father, Samuel Dabney, was a planter, apparently not above medium circumstances. Richard was one of twelve children, and his education was limited to the usual rudiments of the rural schools of the period. But he was apparently dissatisfied with this meager intellectual fare, and, when about sixteen years of age, he began to study the classics under a tutor. He thus rapidly prepared himself to be an assistant teacher in one of the schools of Richmond, Virginia. When the Richmond theatre was destroyed by fire in 1812, he was so badly burned as to be disfigured for life. Opium was unfortunately prescribed, and upon recovery from the immediate effects of his injuries he found himself a slave to the drug. As a rather natural concomitant, alcoholic stimulation was demanded, and for the rest of his life Dabney was more or less subject to these two influences. In 1812 he published at Richmond, *Poems, Original and Translated*. An enlarged edition was issued at Philadelphia in 1815. In this city he was engaged in literary work for a few years.

Some of the details of Dabney's life are obscure, but apparently about this same year he returned to Louisa County where he attempted, not very successfully, to teach school until his death in 1825.

When, after the lapse of almost a century, one tries to penetrate the veil of mystery which surrounds this human personality, he is above all impressed with the sense of tragedy in the life of Dabney, the failure of what was, viewed in its true historic perspective, a great talent. The key to this tragedy is of course obvious. It lies in the fatal fire which fastened the shackles of a benumbing habit upon Dabney. Moreover, the disfigurement which he received caused him to shun society henceforth, except at night, when, it is said, men rode as much as thirty miles to be with him, so entertaining was his cultured conversation.

Such, in brief, are the outward facts of Dabney's life. When he began to attempt to make a living by his pen, literary conditions in this country were radically different from those which prevail now. It was a period of intellectual subordination to Europe, and against the feeling on the part of many Americans that a native production was scarcely worth reading our first authors had to wage a desperate, and in many cases a losing, battle. If even to-day the opinion is not uncommon that British writers, especially English university men, write better than American ones, it is not hard to imagine how firmly this view was entrenched a century ago. True enough there was a growing feeling that intellectual freedom was as necessary as political freedom, but as yet no one had appeared of influence enough to be the writer of a declaration that would be heard and heeded over all the land. Therefore the man of letters who might arise, while he could count upon the enthusiastic support of a circle of intellectual insurrectionists, had a still larger group to address who were indifferent about the authorship, American or European, of what they read, and another body that had a distrust, not to say contempt in some cases, of an American literary production.

Besides this reason of a divided reading public, there were other causes why literature as a profession should not be highly profitable in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The fates were kind to Dabney in that they had caused his lot to be cast in Philadelphia, the publishing centre of the time, for the most productive period of his life. The reading public of 1815 or thereabouts stretched from Maine to New Orleans. West-

ward, in broad outline, it extended only to the borders of Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi, though there were some more or less isolated nuclei of literary culture further west. To reach this long stretch of territory in those days of slow travel required a great deal of time and a considerable outlay of money.

At the north, moreover, were the rival publishing centres of New York and of Boston. It was not a time when a feeling of sectionalism was so innocuous as at the present day, and any writer had a certain sectional antagonism to overcome. Communication with great Britain was well established, and, comparatively speaking, fairly rapid. To receive books from Great Britain was, then, often to follow the lines of least resistance, rather than for Boston to get the work of some particular author from Philadelphia, or Charleston, or from New York,—though Charleston figured little in the book-importing trade of the period. Such were some of the influences that made unenviable the lot of the man who tried to earn his living, or any considerable part of it, with his pen.

But these were not the only adverse influences to be reckoned with. Dabney as a southerner had problems slightly different from those which would have confronted a New Yorker or a Bostonian. In the South, literature was of small practical value as a profession. The publishing centres were few; there was little demand for hack work; and journalism was not a profitable field. Southern magazines were not flourishing; and, moreover, the strongest appeal which could be made to the literary temper of the South was already held by oratory. Against all this, however, must be weighed the existence of a cultivated leisure class such as could be found, save in scanty numbers indeed, nowhere else in America.

There was, in fact, little call in any part of this country for hack work early in the nineteenth century. Let us look for a moment at Philadelphia as the city where the greatest demand for such work might be expected to exist. The exact date of Dabney's coming to Philadelphia is uncertain, but it was probably 1813. He came then with the prestige of having already published a successful volume of poems, and, by some, he must have been hailed as one of those bright angels who

were to lead America from its literary bondage. But poetry has seldom been a fully satisfying means of support; and Dabney had to look around for something that might serve as a bread-winner while his soul worshipped at the shrine of the Muses. Naturally with his literary facility and his knowledge of the classics, he turned to the publishers for employment. A glance at the activities of Philadelphia publishing houses at this general period will enable us to see what, in general, were the chances for employment of a literary nature.

Wilson's *American Ornithology* (1808-14) had reached its eighth volume when Wilson died in 1813. The American edition of Abraham Rees's *Cyclopædia, or University Dictionary* in,—according to the title-page,—forty-one volumes appeared between 1810-24. By 1818 it had, through an outlay of \$200,000, forced Bradford, the publisher, to turn it over to a syndicate. Marshall's *Life of Washington*, and the first American edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, works of five and of twenty-one volumes, belonging to a slightly earlier period. Joel Barlow's colossal epic, *The Columbiad*, was printed in Philadelphia rather than in New England, an indication of the supremacy of Philadelphia in the publishing trade. Of course there was a large amount of publication which might have furnished employment to one on Grub Street for lesser periods. The only magazine which would have consistently given aid during the greater part of the first quarter of the century was the *Port Folio*.

We have heard much of the existence on Grub Streets of British literary centres, London, Edinburgh, and others. What was such a life in our literary capital a century ago? The chief employer and friend of Dabney in Philadelphia was Mathew Carey, its most prominent publisher.* The correspondence between the two still survives. The glimpses we get of Dabney in his letters are not reassuring regarding the case of eking out a living. Had his employer not been one of the most helpful of men, it might have been still more difficult. In one of his

*For a sketch of Mathew Carey, see the writer's article "An Early American Publisher and His Audience," in the *Sewanee Review*, July, 1913.

letters Dabney says, "A stranger in the place, without friends, and without recommendations, I met in your [Carey's] almost unexpected accession to my application present relief and generous confidence." The blight upon the brilliant promise of Dabney is touched upon in the next sentence when he says, "If during the existence of our intercourse, anything on my part has appeared to you eccentric or offensive, it is to be attributed to a wretched state of health, and to a mind *not always at ease*."

Among other work Dabney did translating of various sorts for his employers. The pay of work at this period may be roughly gauged by this extract from a letter of 1814:—

"For week employed in compiling geographical questions in Morse \$6.

"For 4 days employed in translating Eugene De Rothelin from the French \$2.49 cts.

"Or if upon consideration Mr. C. should relinquish, (which I think it would be very well to do) having anything more done in the translating of that French novel, the last item of \$2.49 will be struck off."

For one week, then, Dabney had compiled question for \$6.00; for four days he had translated for \$2.49. It is evident from another letter that his entire time during this period was given to this work. Living was cheap in Philadelphia in 1814, but even the most grudging of employers could hardly object to such a wage. The offer to strike off the last item looks like altruism of a high order; or else suicide, one scarcely knows which. In this same letter Dabney reveals the breadth of his scholarship when he desires to substitute for *Eugène Florian's Estelle Pastorale*, together with some translations of Italian pieces in verse, or a translation "of the select pieces of Claudian and Catullus." This latter suggestion seems to have borne some fruit in the enlarged edition of his poems which Dabney published in 1815, for they include translations such as are here indicated.

As yet the struggle, though a disheartening one, was not hopeless, but there are signs that it was becoming increasingly so. On July 29, 1815, Dabney addressed a letter to Carey which ran, in part, as follows:—

“ Ever since last autumn, flattered with the hope of returning to a happier situation in my native state, I have until lately, forborne to engage in any permanent occupation. That hope is now utterly destroyed. Compelled, unwillingly I confess, to look upon this place as my future residence, it becomes necessary for me to look out for some employment, of however disagreeable or profitable description. The editor of the *Port Folio* has promised to engage my occasional assistance in the lighter and miscellaneous articles of the work. But as this is an object that will produce very little remuneration, and occupy not more than a few days each month, it will be perfectly valueless to me unless connected with some other business.”

It must be borne in mind that Dabney is writing in a time of intense depression, occasioned by the war of 1812. He sees, he thinks, brighter days ahead, now that the war is over. But it is evident that the battle is going steadily against him, for only a month later he writes a note in which he says he is forced to change his lodgings. This pathetic note is repeated the following month. He is about, he says, to be put out of his boarding house because he is one month behind in his pay, and he requests an advance of \$20. The next we hear of Dabney, he is in his old home, Louisa County, Virginia.

Such, then, is the story of one man of brilliant promise who tried to make his way by his pen in the beginning of the nineteenth century. As a whole, it is a history of outward failure. How much of this is due to the untoward circumstances of the times and what part may be attributed to the unfortunate habits of Dabney himself, it is impossible to state accurately. Undoubtedly, however, the conditions of the period were extraordinary unpropitious.

It must be borne in mind that Dabney was no mere hack writer. As has already been stated, he presents some interesting problems in the history of American culture.

He lived in a period when at least a smattering of the classics was looked upon as almost necessary to every gentleman of his section. But Dabney's knowledge of the literature of Greece and Rome must, when all the facts are taken into consideration, be regarded as astonishing. Poe has furnished us with a classic

example of how little learning may be used to create the impression of profound scholarship. But with this in mind when we approach the lesser Virginian with caution, we are bound to acknowledge that Dabney's learning is genuine.

In the 1815 edition of his *Poems*, Dabney shows that he had read and can quote, translate, or imitate the following rather remarkable list of the great and of the near great: Alison, Diderot, Shakespeare, Horace, Anacreon, Rousseau, Byron, Catullus, Pope, Gray, Sir W. Jones, Locke, Giorgi Bertola, Landino, Lollius Bassus, Apollodorus, Hybrias, Euripides, George Buchanan, Archias, Bacchylides, Tyrtæus, Simonides, Homer, Paulus Silentarius, Hugo Grotius, Mimmermus, Achæus, Sappho, Argentarius, Warton, Crinagorus, Menander, Parmenis, Thrallus, Martial, Seneca, Cowley, Boileau, Lorenzo de' Medici, Walpole, Milton, Miss Seward, Vincenzo Filicaja, Carlo Frugoni, G. Colpani, A. Bertola, Saverio Bettinelli, and M. de Florian. The Greek and the Latin writers do not come from one or two editions or collections, while as many as three editions of Buchanan are referred to. In the face of such a list one is apt to feel some slight suspicion of attitudinizing. But the essential sincerity of Dabney cannot be questioned.

Just a glance at the condition of classic scholarship in this country in about 1815. Anacreon in the list above had been referred to in the Philadelphia edition. The *Port Folio* in 1806 congratulated the country on the successful printing of Xenophon's *Cyropædia*, which was, according to the editor, the first attempt in Greek printing in this country. Mr. William Poyntell, together with Mr. Samuel Bradford, he goes on to say, "established on a wide and permanent basis what, with perfect propriety, they denominated a *Classic Press*. Many of the Latin classics have appeared much to the credit of the proprietors. But the Greek language being in Milton's phrase, 'somewhat of a higher mood,' no types extant in this country, scarcely a printer capable of correcting the text, and, moreover, the demand for Greek books in America being pretty liberally supplied by the trade in England, the republication of a book in the language of Homer was for a long time considered by the

timidity of some, and the ignorance of others, as a most desperate undertaking."

If printers with Greek scholarship really accurate enough to correct a text were so scarce in America, the amount of Greek scholarship must have been inconsiderable. The acquisitions of Dabney, therefore, stand out in higher relief. To the student they have the distinct value of showing that such accumulation was possible in this country in or before the year of 1818, even for one not born, as were the Mathers, for example, to hereditary learning. As Dabney was never abroad, he was that great desideratum of self-conscious republican America, an article of "American manufacture."

Another interesting little sidelight upon the learning of the period is found in a letter written from London by F. W. Gilmer in 1824. He was in Great Britain trying to get men for the faculty of the University of Virginia. While in Edinburgh he says he "saw needy young men living miserably up 10 or 12 stories in the wretched climate of Edinburgh, reluctant to join us." By 1824 Dabney as a college instructor would have been out of the question; but a person wonders, without fear of striking the note of provincial narrowness at this day, whether there were not others in this country who might have been satisfactory. The letter bears various interpretations. Dabney may have been actually immensely superior to his contemporaries of the same age; and such seems to be the fact. Gilmer, perhaps, was looking for men in other lines than those of languages, or he may have been possessed with the idea that to be American was, culturally at least, to be necessarily inferior.

A glance at the first list above shows that Dabney was well acquainted with Italian, from which he has several translations. If Dabney's classical scholarship is worthy of note, it is chiefly because of its quantity. For a native American, especially a Southerner, where the population was more homogeneous, to have been a master of Italian without having traveled abroad was, in the year 1815, something which becomes the more remarkable the more one examines it. The pioneer names in the history of early Italian culture in this country are Lorenzo Da Ponte, Ticknor, Richard Henry Wilde, and Longfellow. With

the exception of Da Ponte, the scene of whose activities was New York City, these men all appear as teachers of Italian too late to have benefitted Dabney had he been able to study under them. There is no direct evidence that Dabney did not study the language in New York, but the indirect evidence is overwhelmingly against it.

Translations from Petrarch by George Frederick Nott were printed in this country in 1809, followed a year later by Hoole's Tasso, which was succeeded in 1816 by the same writer's Ariosto. Cary's translation of Dante appeared at Philadelphia in 1822. None of these translators, it may be noticed, are Americans. It seems, then, that Dabney was the first translator in this country to issue any representative amount of Italian translation in book form.

Where was it that Dabney learned Italian? Lowell, in his time, speaks of catching a stray Frenchman now and then and keeping him until the boys drove him to giving dancing lessons off the campus instead of French ones on it. The chances of catching an Italian would have been decidedly less, either in Boston or in Philadelphia. Da Ponte thought, in 1805, that the language and the literature of Turkey or of China were as well known to the New Yorkers as that of Italy. If Dabney had any appreciable aid or incentive from the outside toward learning Italian it must have been small and exceedingly hard to trace. If an anachronism may be pardoned, perhaps he took the advice of Lowell on learning Italian: buy a Dante and a dictionary and go ahead. In 1815 Ticknor had great difficulty in getting a copy of Dante in Boston, and no help was to be obtained in reading it. That the Dante, the dictionary, and the help were forthcoming in Philadelphia or in Richmond at an earlier date, is mere conjecture. The results are evident and undisputable.

In effect, then, Dabney stands as a remarkable example of Italian culture at an early period in this country. If to this we add a mastery of French, Latin, and Greek, he becomes a noteworthy figure in the development of American literary culture—a proof which Neal and Lowell might have used that even in the first quarter of the nineteenth century America could export, if necessary, such an article as culture.

All of this culture and all of this learning Dabney used to make his poetry unique for the period. The first edition of his poems, Richmond, 1812, is now practically unobtainable. The enlarged one of Philadelphia, 1815, is very scarce. References are to this small volume of 180 pages. Dabney's theory of poetry, as given in his preliminary remarks, is nearest exemplified elsewhere in our literature by the sonnet sequence. He insists that a work of art should produce one unmingled emotion. He therefore submits to the public "a species of composition which he ventures to demonstrate the *moral miniature of poetry*; inasmuch as the exertions of the graphic art are generally restricted to a paucity of objects, in relation to expression."

The first two-thirds of the volume is accordingly devoted to what Dabney calls "illustrations of simple moral emotions." Here his theory is shown at its best. One average example will suffice for Dabney as literary theorist and as verse artist:—

ILLUSTRATION III.—*Listlessness and Apathy.*

1.

'Tis sweet, at tranquil eventide,
To trace the streamlet's winding side,
To where the rippling waters play,
And dash, through channeled rocks, their way;
Where alder boughs and hazel flowers,
Some rough and mossy rock embowers;
There bid the abstracted mind exclude,
Whate'er is harsh, whate'er is rude;
And all unconscious that we live,
Taste the best bliss that life can give.

2.

There, freed from all intruding woes,
'Tis sweet to let the soul repose
Upon itself—and idly trace
Seducing forms of imaged grace;
And rove beyond the common line
Of common souls, to things divine.
Or bid, in fancy, glow again
Some burnished link of memory's chain;
And all unconscious that we live,
Taste the best bliss that life can give.

The mood of apathy is then developed through two corresponding stanzas. Such is Dabney's method in depicting a large number of our primary moods. Though reminded occasionally of the popular eighteenth century Pains and Pleasures series, one recognizes the essential originality of Dabney. The plan may promise a wooden performance. Such is not the case. The poet has culture and personality enough to avoid this, and the reader feels that Dabney's theories have been true to him, in that, while avoiding monotony, he has produced a unity and a strength of impression which causes him to rank deservedly high among our first singers.

The miscellaneous poems and the translations need not detain us. In the former there are some felicitous expressions of southern chivalry towards the opposite sex. The accuracy and the breadth of learning in the latter have already been pointed out. All the way through the volume one notes the presence of that quality which is so sadly lacking in early American literature—balance and the sense of cultivated restraint.

Though not infrequently dangerous, speculations are, nevertheless, sometimes interesting. Fate, had she been more kind to Dabney, apparently would have put it in his power to do for American poetry much of the service which was later reserved for Longfellow. Culture, order, classic repose, the weighing of all things by that which is best—these qualities he apparently would have brought into our turbid literature a generation before they do appear, had not poverty and opium written him as of those who were about to be.

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